Case study: Implementing Active Self-Feedback

Jenni Rose, Report writing (Business, Accounting and Finance)

Course information

MBA students studying business, accounting and finance must write a report summarising a set of financial statements from an employee's perspective. The genre of report writing was chosen for active self-feedback as it is an important skill in business, but for many students it is a skill which needs to be learnt from scratch. MBA students would be expected to have had some experience of this prior to starting the MBA but may not feel confident in the language and structure used in a business report.

To address this Jenni Rose asked students to write their own report and compare this to two exemplar reports. They wrote down answers to a series of question and follows up with peer and then whole class discussion. The task was completed in class in around 40 minutes.

The task

First, students were asked to write a one page report explaining what information is needed by MBA candidates when they decide on whether to accept employment with a new organisation. It was suggested that this could include wanting to understand the financial performance of the company, its sustainability practices, the gender pay gap. They had to start with a blank page, which was uncomfortable for many students, drawing on ideas from Peter Elbow on [freewriting](#). This also helped students write first without AI so that they could let their ideas flow with minimal editing.

Secondly students were provided with two 'good' one page reports. Crucially these reports were on a different topic to the one being studied, so that they could focus on how to write reports, rather than the topic. It also meant that students were not able to copy from the exemplar when asked to redraft their own work. The reflective questions they answered were:

1. Identify three similarities in them that to your mind justifies calling them of good quality. Give reasons for your answers
2. Which of the two reports do you think is better for an audience of the general public? Give reasons for your answer.
3. What did you learn about your report writing from answering these questions? Identify three things you learned and write a sentence on each.
4. Based on the comparison of these reports with yours how would you improve your report? Write down the two main improvements you will make.
5. How do you feel about writing this reflective method of writing feedback for yourself?

Finally, students were asked to redraft their report, incorporating the answers to the questions above.

Reflections from students

Students generally felt very positive about this task and the following quotes show how they felt about the process and its impact on their learning and self-regulation:

"Writing your own report before comparing helped me the most because then I already am in the thought process of what should go into the report and then seeing two reports helped me to think how I can make my report better."

"While writing our own report allowed us to put across our points in an organic and unbiased way, comparing our report to the two reports made us refine our reports, tailoring them in an effective and concise manner."

"I think writing my own report first before comparing... [the exemplars] ...gave me a sense of what has been lacking in my report. I think comparing first will not help me out because I do not have a baseline."

"This type of active feedback method makes a person become more proactive and have initiative in looking for ways to improve. Giving oneself own feedback is helpful as it allows one to reflect better and draw out more insights."

"Writing out thoughts is more difficult than processing the comparisons internally, which forces further review."

"Writing it out helps in retaining it and acting upon it – plus it makes the reflection process more digestible (as opposed to just reading or thinking and moving on)."

"It allows for self-reflection and introspection about the work we have done."

"It helps one to instantly identify areas of mistakes and so corrections can be instantaneous."

"I will use the reference comparison to work in the future. This is like the academic hack, it helps me working on my ideas."

Reflections from the teacher

Completing self-feedback in class significantly enhanced students' ability to self-regulate and improve their work. It gave students a chance to use the method in class, and then they were more engaged in future self-feedback task set by the teacher and completed their own versions of self-feedback in later work.

By first producing a draft, students were able to identify their own gaps and then use the exemplars as targeted feedback tools, rather than generic models. This process empowered them to take ownership of their learning, and they produced more actionable and personalised self-feedback. I particularly liked helping students become more comfortable with starting from a blank page, where they could freely write which aligns with pedagogical principles of learning from errors and supported deeper engagement with the task. From a teaching perspective, I felt that this approach improved student agency and, from reading student's self-feedback it provided me with valuable insights into their thinking. The experience affirmed the value of integrating structured self-feedback prompts into exemplar-based learning to cultivate reflective, independent learners.

Pedagogical research on this task

Pedagogical research has been conducted with Jenni Rose and David Nicol into this task in the paper "Promoting learner self-regulation: **Is it better to give students exemplars before or after producing work?**", published in Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education in 2025.

This study offers compelling evidence that the timing of exemplar use significantly influences student learning and self-regulation, resulting the overall recommendation that students should write their own report on a blank page before comparing.

In the study two groups were used for this task one analysing exemplars before writing a report and the other after. We found that students who engaged with exemplars after producing their own work not only achieved higher grades but also generated more actionable and personalised self-feedback. This suggests that having a concrete piece of their own work to reflect upon allows students to identify specific gaps and apply insights from exemplars more effectively. The findings challenge the traditional assumption that exemplars are most beneficial when used as preparatory tools and instead highlight their value as reflective instruments that support learning from errors and iterative improvement.

The paper also uses a self-regulation lens. It shows that analysing exemplars after task completion activates a powerful form of inner feedback and that students work comparing their own output with high-quality examples helps them apply their self-feedback and then apply it when redrafting their work.

Overall, both exemplars before writing something and exemplars after writing improve student agency and metacognitive awareness, but the "exemplars after" method appears to better support learning transfer and performance enhancement.

Student quotes

In the paper several quotes are used from students to illustrate this for example:

From Group A (Exemplars After Producing Work)

"Writing your own report before comparing helped me the most because then I already am in the thought process of what should go into the report and then seeing two reports helped me to think how I can make my report better."

"While writing our own report allowed us to put across our points in an organic and unbiased way, comparing our report to the two reports made us refine our reports, tailoring them in an effective and concise manner."

"I think writing my own report first before comparing…[the exemplars] …gave me a sense of what has been lacking in my report. I think comparing first will not help me out because I do not have a baseline."

"This type of active feedback method makes a person become more proactive and have initiative in looking for ways to improve. Giving oneself own feedback is helpful as it allows one to reflect better and draw out more insights."

From Group B (Exemplars Before Producing Work)

"It is useful to see samples of good quality so we can get an idea of how to correctly do things before starting our work."

"It was helpful to look at examples of good reports first, to sort of guide how I can replicate that in my report writing."

"This forces everyone to critically analyse the reports and not just rely on the teacher to give us the answers."

These quotes illustrate how students in the "exemplars after" group found the process more reflective and empowering, enabling them to identify and act on specific areas for improvement. In contrast, students in the "exemplars before" group appreciated the clarity and structure exemplars provided but tended to describe the experience in more general, preparatory terms.

Reference

Nicol, D. & Rose, J. (2025) Promoting learner self-regulation: Is it better to give students exemplars before or after producing work? Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, (under review).